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ABSTRACT

The classification of communication activity into interpersonal and mass communication is inadequate. A third category, "medio" communication, is also needed. Examples of this third type include point-to-point telecommunication (such as the telephone or mobile radio), surveillance telecommunication, and closed-circuit television. Medio communication shares characteristics of both interpersonal and mass communication. Like the former, the audience is usually small in number. The message is not public. The interaction pattern is fairly unstructured. Like mass communication, the audience can be heterogeneous and be spatially distant. The message is transmitted rapidly, and the channel used is usually expensive. Also, a technical instrument is used for message transmission. As one moves from interpersonal to medio to mass communication, the following characteristics appear: 1) the audience per communicator becomes larger; 2) the message becomes less specialized and more public; 3) the cost is higher; 4) the opportunity to participate diminishes; 5) there is less feedback; 6) there are more taboos in what is said. (JK)

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MEDIO COMMUNICATION: A CONCEPTUALIZATION

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The paper argues that the classification of communication activity into a dichotomy of interpersonal communication and mass communication is an inadequate one, and proposes a classification of communication activity into three types: interpersonal, medio, and mass. Characteristics and other aspects of interpersonal communication, medio communication, and mass communication are presented, as well as some general characteristics surrounding communication activity as one moves from interpersonal to medio to mass communications.

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MEDIO COMMUNICATION: A CONCEPTUALIZATION

The concern of the communicologist centers on those factors surrounding the communicative process--the production, organization, composition, structure, distribution, and functions of message systems in societies.[1]

In the classification of the communicative process, one of the broadest and most fundamental distinctions made by the communicologist is that between interpersonal (face-to-face) communication patterns and mass communication patterns. This dichotomy has proven to be a very useful one in both communication research and pedagogy.

Interpersonal communication is popularily conceptualized as including communicative acts in the relatively informal social situations in which persons in face-to-face settings sustain a focused interaction through the reciprocal exchange of verbal and nonverbal cues.[2] This type of communication is distinguished by the following major characteristics: (1) the presence of two or more individuals in physical proximity, (2) involved in focused interactions, supplying social cues for one another to act on, (3) with the focused interaction proceeding through an exchange of messages, (4) in face-to-face encounters where all sense modalities can be exploited.[3]

While other characteristics can be identified, most discussions on interpersonal communication include the foregoing; some other characteristics will be presented later in this discussion.

By contrast, mass communication is impersonal communication, involving only the visual and/or auditory senses, which is transmitted via technical instruments to large audiences. This type of communication is distinguished by the following major characteristics: (1) it is directed toward a relatively large, heterogeneous, and anonymous audience; (2) the message is public, rapid, and transient; and (3) the communicator operates within a complex organization that involves a degree of expense.[4] Again, other characteristics can be identified that are most often present in mass communication, but the foregoing has a universal acceptance among students of this area. Other characteristics, however, will be treated later in this discussion.

After reviewing the definitions of interpersonal and mass communication, a survey of the full range of communication activity discloses that the traditional dichotomy does not encompass all types of communication. Indeed, there is much on-going communication activity which cannot be classified into either of the standard categories.

On the one hand, the communicologist concerned with interpersonal communication defines his area of concern, and, by implication, assigns all other communication activity to mass communication. At the same time, the communicologist whose interest falls in the area of mass communication defines his area of inquiry, and, again by implication, assigns all other communication activity to the interpersonal communication category.

From time to time the investigator further defines his boundaries by suggesting what is not in his area. Thus we have Barnlund, in Interpersonal Communications, saying, "...some of these networks involve as many as five persons and thus appear to lie at the outer edge of interpersonal behavior,..."[5] Or Wright, regarding mass communication, saying, "Such a criterion excludes letters, telephone calls, telegrams, and the like." Or again, "Thus communications directed toward an exclusive or elite audience are excluded. For example, the transmission of news (by whatever means) exclusively to members to a governing party or ruling class is not mass communication." Wright also explains, "The nation-wide telecast of a political convention is mass communication; the closed-circuit telecast of industrial operations that are monitored by an engineer is not. Or to take a more mundane example, a Hollywood motion picture is mass communication; a home movie of vacation scenes is not."[6]

As a result there remains a gray area--an intermediate area of communication (henceforth called medio: from the latin meaning middle)--that has characteristics of both interpersonal communication and of mass communication but which is claimed by neither. In short, the traditional dichotomy of interpersonal and mass communications must give way to a new trichotomy of communication types involving interpersonal, medio, and mass communication.

The need for a delineation of this area hinges on two factors. The first is that definitions are indispensable to a discipline--in this case, communicology. The second is that the ordering into a trichotomy contributes

to the formulation of a communicology taxonomy (the development of definitions of descriptive categories that a communicologist is to use), without which a discipline cannot adequate progress.[7]

While Wright's examples of home movies or industrial assembly line monitoring may not generate much concern among investigators for systematic analysis, other types of communication relegated to this intermediate area do. The implications of such types of communication as point-to-point telecommunication (telephone, teletype, mobile radio, air to ground radio, etc.), surveillance telecommunication (radar, atmospheric pollution monitoring, weather satellite, etc.), as well as closed-circuit television in the classroom are highly significant today.

What, then, are the characteristics of medio communication? As noted earlier, intermediate communication includes characteristics of both interpersonal and mass communication. Like interpersonal communication, the recipient, or audience, is normally small in number--often only one--and is identifiable. The message is most often transmitted under restricted conditions (hence, the message is not public). The participants usually enjoy an intellectual mutuality most often associated with interpersonal communication. And, finally, the interaction pattern, to a fair degree, is unstructured.

On the other hand, like mass communication, the audience can be heterogeneous and have spacial distance. The message is transmitted rapidly, reaching most audience members simultaneously. The communicator may or may not operate within a complex organization, but the channel he utilizes most often is expensive. Finally, like mass communication, a distinguishing characteristic is the presence of a technical intrument for message transmission.

The following schema presents some of the characteristics discussed to this point as well as other aspects surrounding the three types of communication. Further, as one moves from interpersonal communication to medio communication to mass communication, the delineation also suggests some general characteristics which mark this area of study. They include:

1. Normally, the audience per communicator becomes progressively larger. (In the United States today a single mass-communicated message may reach an audience of more than 50 million people.)

2. The nature of the message communicated becomes less and less private or specialized, and more and more public.

3. The range of difference between various communications becomes progressively narrower. (One can say almost anything to his best friend. But as the audience becomes larger, the communicator is subject to more and more restrictions, taboos, codes, and cautions.)[8]

4. The cost of message transmission becomes progressively more expensive.

5. The opportunity to participate as the communicator progressively diminishes.

6. The frequency and time-span of the feedback process becomes progressively less and less. In interpersonal communication, feedback is easy, profuse, and immediate; in mass communication, feedback is delayed, sparse, and difficult to receive.

Footnotes

[1]See George Gerbner, "Mass Media and Human Communication Theory," in Dance (ed.), Human Communication Theory (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1967), p. 52.

[2]Dean C. Barnlund, Interpersonal Communication: Survey and Studies (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), p. 10.

[3]Ibid., pp. 8-10.

[4]Charles R. Wright, Mass Communication: A Sociological Perspective (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 15.

[5]Barnlund, p. 239.

[6]Wright, pp. 12-14.

[7]Hans L. Zetterberg, On Theory and Verification in Sociology (Totowa, New Jersey: The Bedminster Press, 1963), pp. 24-31.

[8]Gerhart D. Wiebe, "Mass Communications," in Hartley and Hartley, Fundamentals of Social Psychology (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952), p. 163.